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ABSTRACT

A British 12-year-old boy died while imitating the heroic leaps of the cartoon character Batman. Tragic incidents stemming from cartoon imitation such as this one occur with alarming frequency. Still, many people choose to ignore violence in children's cartoons. Even some experts don't recognize that cartoons may be harmful. Researcher Wilbur Schramm, for example, says "not all (children's) violence is intended to be taken seriously; the cartoons...are intended to be funny rather than exciting." However, evidence from many other research studies indicates that although cartoons may be intended to be humorous, they mask a potential danger and cause aggression in children. To minimize the effect of the violence in cartoons on children, cartoons must be produced with knowledge of their impact. For example, cartoons should not make use of household tools like knives or other kitchen appliances, nor should they depict actions a child might imitate without a full working knowledge of the consequences. (MP)

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Cartoon Violence

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Violence in Children's Cartoons

On Saturday mornings sleepy children are almost magnetically drawn toward the television set. The television snaps into full attention at the flick of a switch. Road Runner, Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig and the rest of the gang wisk the children off into an animated world.

Meanwhile, parents leisurely sleep, confident that their child is being entertained and kept quiet. But it's time for parents to wake up and realize what's going on in the TV room.

A British 12-year-old boy died while imitating his hero Batman. His neck caught in the nylon loop strung from the roof while he had been practicing heroic leaps. He hung, still cloaked in his homemade Batman outfit.

Tragic incidents stemming from cartoon imitation occur with alarming frequency. Still, many people choose to ignore violence in children's cartoons. Even some experts don't recognize that cartoons may be harmful; perhaps it is because cartoons are usually made to be entertaining. Researcher Wilber Schramm says, "Not all this [children's] violence is intended to be taken seriously; the cartoons... are intended to be

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funny rather than exciting."

Although cartoon violence may be intended to be humorous, the shows are causing aggression in children. Therefore, these "funny" cartoons are a facade, masking a potential danger.

Part of the problem with studying the effects of violence is the hazy definition of the actual term. George Gerbner, who studied trends in violence, defines violence as "the overt expression of physical force against others or the compelling of overt action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed." Given this definition, cartoons, slapstick, accidents and physical force constitute violence.

Perhaps if cartoons were meant to be viewed by an older audience, the violent episodes would not be as big a concern. However, the young child may not understand a character's motivation and the consequence of an aggressive act. As Jean Piaget, famous Swiss psychologist, wrote in 1926, "...the child of six or seven has great difficulty in making causal connections or reasoned explanations simply because he is 'centered' on one event, or one fact. It is possible that this 'centering' also influences children's thinking about human motivation. In particular, they may find it impossible to make a

connection between an actor's immediate goal (means) and his more distant goal (ends) and therefore show incomplete understanding of his motives."

Thus, children may find violence acceptable, ordinary and unremarkable. Cartoon characters are constantly being flattened, beaten, run over or blown up leaving the character without any visible damage. Gerbner's work shows that one half of all violent episodes leave characters without any painful effects. Children may interpret violence as harmless since nothing permanent is done. Think of all the abuse the road runner has taken...and he's still alive rerun after rerun.

Despite the problem of young children mixing reality and fantasy, they still spend one third of their leisurely hours watching characters attempt to mutilate each other. Watching the coyote get blown away is as common to a child as the adult's cup of coffee.

As Harry Skornia, Vice-President of the National Association Better Broadcasting, has warned, "If I were to attempt to destroy a Nation internally, I would brain-wash that nation into accepting violence. I would educate masses to hate and kill and burn and destroy. I would condition people to tolerate violence as an acceptable type of behavior and condone its use as the most effective

way to solve problems. I would provide specific lessons in the use of guns and knives and show how cars can be used as instruments of death. I would present this information entertainingly--in the form of television."

As one 11-year-old Denver child said, "You see so much violence that it's meaningless. If I saw someone really get killed, it wouldn't be a big deal. I guess I'm turning into a hard rock." Therefore, children may become desensitized to violence because of its alarming frequency.

Television does make an enormous impact on children. ~~According to the Nielson Television Index, preschoolers watch television an average of 54 hours a week.~~ One study showed that nine out of ten preschoolers identified Fred Flintstone. Many adults can not recognize their president, leader or king.

A child may get a distorted view of the amount of violence in the world. In most homes, children will not see much violence other than spankings or minor sibling fights. On the other hand, 40 million people saw Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald on television.

Constant viewing of cartoons provides children with a packaged fantasy where no interaction can take place. One 9-year-old San Francisco child claimed, "I'd rather watch television than play outside because it's so boring

outside. They always have the same rides, like swings and things."

Educators Dorothy Singer and Jerome Singer from Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center, say, "Children who are extremely heavy TV viewers are often less likely to develop imaginary playmates or elaborate imaginary tendencies...Children who play more extensively are less likely to be aggressive, use many themes besides television and are more likely to be cooperative and pleasant."

George Gerbner's research shows, "Saturday morning cartoons have the heaviest saturation of violence on all television with one violent episode every two minutes." All this violence is being broadcast to 17.65 million children between 9:30 and 10:30 Saturday mornings.

Michael Morgan, an author of the Violence Profile, claims that this year has the highest rate of violence since 1969. However, Thomas Radecki, a director of National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV), says, "Kids prefer non-violent shows." He finds it encouraging that a new popular cartoon, "The Smurfs," has 50 percent fewer acts of violence than the average cartoon. NCTV's goal is to decrease the amount of violence by 75 percent. "The amount of violence is still high but we're closer to reaching our goal."

A few years ago the "catharsis theory" was popular. This reassuring theory asserts that seeing violence is a useful outlet for aggression. Children would release their anger and self-doubts by watching others act out violent situations. Vicor Cline, a University of Utah professor of psychology, blantantly says, "Seeing violence stimulates children aggressively; it also shows them how to commit aggressive acts."

In addition, Skornia relates heavy viewing with juvenile crime, "The fact that youth readily learn what television teaches is substantiated in a 1,200% increase in juvenile crime during the last 20-years-America's 'TV Age.'" Even a child watching television for a short period of time will learn methods of murder.

Freud, in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, interpretedaggression or hostile humor as "...a veiled form of attact which satifies an aggressive motive of its author. Cartoons, jokes and anecdotes which derogate an objective or emphasize themes of its destruction or suffering all fall under this rubric. When an audience laughs at or enjoys aggressive humor it has accepted the humorist's implicit invitation to join in the assult."

Children will imitate aggressive acts regardless of whether the figure is live or on film. Researchers

Bandura, Ross and Ross found, "Subjects who viewed the aggressive human and cartoon models on film, exhibited nearly twice as much aggression as did subjects in the control group who did not see aggressive film content." Brief exposures may be repeated by 88 percent of the children.

Gerbner has found that "Cartoons have consistently exceeded all other categories of programs including action-type, in the number of violent episodes..." Another report found that cartoons have three times the average rate of violence. The chances of a cartoon character being attacked is 800 times higher than in real-life.

Cartoons also present a distorted view of the number of men and women. Levinson found that men outnumbered women three to one. Animal characters were also 75 percent male. The typical female character was a housewife whereas male characters had more variety of occupations.

Stacks of evidence against cartoons led the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence to speak out on the impact of violence. Although this organization is not specifically concerned with cartoon violence, it stated, "We believe it is reasonable to conclude that a constant diet of violent behavior on television has an

adverse effect on human character and attitudes. Violence on television encourages violent forms of behavioral and fosters moral and social values about violence in daily life that are unacceptable in a civilized society."

Dr. Jesse Steinfeld, the Surgeon General, reported to the United States Senate Committee, "While the committee report [Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee] is carefully phrased and qualified in language acceptable to social scientists, it is clear to me that the causal relationship between televised violence and antisocial behavior is sufficient to warrent appropriate and immediate remedial action."

Many parents think that their child is not susceptible to the harmful effects of television. It is true that television's impact is largely determined by family influences, past experiences, and the child's personality. However, these factors may be serving as a buffer rather than a block to television's negative aspects. It is unrealistic to assume that certain family influences can totally counteract television's harmful influences. The problem is capable of effecting all children and is a concern for all parents.

It has been suggested that journalists, which include television writers, take an oath to uphold acceptable

social standards in their work. TV producer Jerry Paris, disturbed with all the sensationalism ~~of various assassinations around~~ surrounding the death of John F. Kennedy, suggested the following pledge:

"In the name of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy, and my family, I make this solemn pledge:

"I will no longer lend my talents in any way to add to the creation of a climate for murder. I call upon all who read this to join me in refusing to write, direct, produce, act or participate in any way in the shaping of any 'entertainment' that celebrates senseless brutality, aimless cruelty, pointless and violent death."

A similar pledge might be directed toward cartoonists: "I will no longer participate in developing any violent cartoons. I will emphasize pro-social skills in an entertaining way for children. In addition, the cartoons will not be easily imitated situations that might lead to a dangerous event for an impressionable child."

An oath might be a positive move toward eliminating excess violence on television. However, some television cartoonists might object to taking an oath. Violence might be considered part of the tool that a writer uses to enhance imagination, fantasy etc. This poetic license

is granted to poets, novelists and denied to newscastors and reporters. The main problem is determining how much poetic license should be granted to the cartonist.

It is important to carefully evaluate the vality of these studies on violence. Studies telling the amount of time children watch television often take into account how many hours the set is on rather than how many hours are actually watched. CBS says, "Viewing by young persons is highly active and discontinuous. Young viewers often do other things while watching such as homework, frequently drift in and out of the room or otherwise divide their attention, very young children often disrupt their viewing by imitating what they have just seen."

A child's background should be an important consideration when selecting subjects for experiments. More careful studies need to be made taking family background and past experiences into account. In most studies, there is always a control group. It is very difficult to have a control group of children with the same experiences and lifestyles. Therefore, these inherent differences may distort the findings.

Parents play a large role in determing the effects of cartoon violence. They may provide their children with additional stimulation. Stimulation may be in the form of reading aloud, initiating fantasy games and backing out or encouraging the child to read. Studies show a drop in

creativity after extensive television viewing. Parental intervention helps combat this problem.

It is beneficial for parents to watch television with the child and explain that the violence is make-believe. One study revealed that more than half of six-year-olds, dreamed about television programs and one-fourth of this group said that the dreams were frightening.

Cartoons are here to stay and when used properly, may have some beneficial results. Although the cathersis theory has lost a lot of support, it still has some truth in it. Syracuse University Professor George Comstock feels, "...it is a natural drive for people to enjoy violent things and violent cartoons serve as a positive outlet for these emotions."

Radecki says, "Sometimes violence is okay. A good documentary or Shakespearean tragedy often are well-made and justify the violence involved."

Therefore, the cartoons must be produced with the knowledge of its impact. For example, cartoons should not make use of household tools like knives or other kitchen appliances. Cartoons showing things that a child might apply without a full working knowledge should also be avoided. A good rule of thumb, as Comstock says is, "the more removed from reality the cartoon, the better

the cartoon will be." For example, a poor cartoon would show a superhero doing fantastic things on bicycles. A child might be apt to mimic this type of situation.

Sometimes a child may understand television production but virtually ignore it and try to imitate stunts anyway. Radecki says, "I once knew a child that could tell exactly how the Spiderman programs were made. He would explain that the actor pretended to climb walls by actually walking on the floor and turning the camera. The same boy tried to imitate Spiderman, fell off a wall and hurt himself."

It is an understatement to say that television can be used to promote social goods. Skornia says, "A nation respects and imitates the actions of personalities whom the nation's media cast up as models. In today's America, those actions are force, violence and militarism. The models are show business celebrities, athletes and non-intellectuals. Hate, violence and crime dominate American television. The great American teaching machine could just as well teach love, credibility, and compassion."

The programs "I Love Lucy," "All in the Family" and "The Waltons" are examples of popular nonviolent shows. Cartoons such as "Fat Albert" and "Shazam" provide entertainment as well as acceptable social values.

Television has the unique opportunity to enter 96 percent of homes and show everything from "Scoobydoo" to presidential results. But the medium must be used carefully. Monica Sims, Head of Children's Programs for British Broadcasting, says, "it is our responsibility to provide all kinds of emotional experience and especially for children from deprived homes who depend on television not only for escape and security but also for a stimulus and expension of experience."

As previously stated, the issue of violence in children's cartoons as well as other television issues, is ambiguous. Researchers Berkowitz and Green showed this ambiguity when they said, "For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor beneficial."

Therefore, one must be aware of the possible dangers of television but realize that more conclusive evidence is needed before a curtailment should occur. Sims eloquently says, "If cartoons and adventure series are equivalent of ice cream, we must also produce the protein, vitamins and mixed ingredients of the main course and in the form and quantity appropriate for children of different ages. Most of all, we want to nourish children so that they can be active and full of enthusiasm to learn and do things for themselves."